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SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT
TUESDAY, MARCH 31, 2009

In Today's Papers

Papers Comment on March 29 Local Elections Results
Media outlets report Prime Minister Erdogan assessed the results of the March 29 municipal elections with his cabinet ministers in a meeting Monday. Government spokesman Cemil Cicek told the press after the meeting, "We will evaluate the results together with scientists and research institutions. We will assess each region separately."

Nationwide support for the ruling AKP in the local elections declined by eight points in comparison to the 2007 general elections. Mainstream Vatan says "around one million voters withdrew their support from the AKP." Mainstream Hurriyet notes the AKP has received support from voters across the country which proves the AKP appeals to voters all over Turkey. The decline seen in the support for the AKP in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and Antalya shows that the AKP has started to face problems in major cities.

Despite the decrease in its votes, says Hurriyet, the AKP is still the strongest party in Turkey and the election results prove the government will carry on until the next elections. Liberal Radikal says voters sent messages to all parties that the AKP was "not unbeatable." Voters behave "normally" when the regime is not threatened by the military, says Radikal, stressing the elections showed that Turkish voters were "mature enough not to be bribed." Mainstream Milliyet says the reasons for the decrease in the AKP votes were: The Deniz Feneri charity fraud and corruption in some municipalities, the AKP government's failure to ease the concerns over secularism; the PM's underestimation of the economic crisis; Erdogan's criticism of businessmen hit by the crisis as "incompetent" and people with credit card debts as "dishonest;" voters' reaction to the ruling party threats that the projects of the municipalities controlled by the parties other than the AKP would be blocked; and the mainly Kurdish areas' perception of food and household aid as well as the television broadcasts in Kurdish as mere "election-oriented moves."

Papers on Political Parties' Performance in March 29 Elections

Mainstream Hurriyet suggests that the far right MHP leader Devlet Bahceli's approach to refrain from tensions and fighting has managed to transform his party into a center-right party. Papers also underline Felicity Party's (SP) success in winning over 5 percent of the vote, and thus emerging as a serious rival to the AKP. Hurriyet notes the elections also underlined once more the Kurdish factor in east and southeast Turkey, and have shown that Turkey should find a formula to live with its Kurdish reality. Mainstream Milliyet says the DTP's landslide victory in the mainly Kurdish east and southeast Turkey highlights the mistakes of the AKP in approaching the Kurdish question. Leftist-nationalist Cumhuriyet observes the CHP owes the increase in its votes not to its headscarf and veil initiatives, but to the influence of Kemal Kilicdaroglu. A former CHP lawmaker, Kilicdaroglu's reputation began climbing after raising corruption claims against high-level AKP officials and mayors. Opinion polls prior to the elections showed the rising support for Kilicdaroglu stemmed from the voters' view of him as an "honest politician." Another interesting result is that in Istanbul, the pro-Kurdish DTP candidate Akin Birdal received over 300,000 of votes, representing around 4.6 percent of the total.

Turkish Businessmen Urge the AKP for More Measures on Economy
Papers report that following the elections, the business world wants the government to concentrate on the economic crisis, with the leading business conglomerate Sabanci Group chair Guler Sabanci urging the government to take medium and long term measures for coping with the economic crisis. Turkey's elite business grouping TUSIAD called on the government to launch new monetary and fiscal policies to revive domestic demand as well as increase the investments. The president of Turkish Union of Chambers (TOBB),

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Rifat Hisarciklioglu, said now the government should focus on economic problems and structural reforms. The pro-government, mainstream Sabah expects the AKP government to strike a new deal with the IMF in April, covering the period until 2012. The AKP is also expected to speed up EU reforms, make constitutional changes and adopt new policies for the mainly Kurdish areas.

Papers expect Prime Minister Erdogan to reshuffle his cabinet after the 8-point decrease in his party votes. Mainstream Haberturk claims six cabinet ministers will be changed.

Editorial Commentary on the Aftermath of March 29 Elections

Sahin Alpay wrote in Islamist oriented Zaman: "The AKP is the winner of this election but they are losing some of their power. PM Erdogan's comments right after the election indicates that he acknowledges this fact and he will take measures accordingly to change the trend in favor of his party."

Erdal Sen wrote in Islamist oriented Zaman: "There are some major factors played in the weakening support for the ruling AKP especially in certain districts. PM Erdogan used an aggressive language during the election campaign which apparently did not appeal to the masses. Local branches relied on the party leader's charisma instead of attempting to downplay their own incompetence. The economic crisis also played a main role."

Rusen Cakir wrote in mainstream Vatan: "Looking at PM Erdogan's reaction to election outcome, it is now a stronger possibility than before there can be a cabinet reshuffle; there will be a newly revised party board as well as new names at the parliamentary group."

Mehmet Yilmaz wrote in mainstream Hurriyet: "The powerful outcome for DTP in the southeast does not necessarily indicate growing separatism. However it is obvious that Kurdish issue is political in its nature and should be resolved accordingly. The government should consider declaring a general amnesty right after the Obama visit."

Hasan Cemal wrote in mainstream Milliyet: "The AKP has got the total votes of CHP and MHP. We still cannot call it an absolute success though. There is a serious warning from the voters. Overall support for AKP was given during the 2007 general elections due to

hope for change. However during the last two years the AKP did not pursue this ambition. Insensitivity regarding different lifestyles and secularism as well as the impact of economic crisis and mishandling of it are among the main reasons for voters have chosen to warn the ruling party."

Calls Made to Boost Relations Between Turkey and Armenia Instead of Using the Word 'Genocide'
CNN Turk, mainstream Milliyet and mainstream Hurriyet are reporting today that U.S. think tank CSIS has issued a report regarding "The Changing Dynamics in Turkey" that suggests President Obama "not recognize genocide claims or use the word 'genocide' to describe the events of 1915." In a related story, Milliyet also reports that the U.S.-Turkey Friendship Group in the U.S. Congress, led by Congressman Wexler, has sent a letter to President Gul and to President Sarkysyan to "call for normalization of relations and for efforts toward positive dialogue in the Caucasus." Rep. Ike Skelton, Rep. John Murtha, and Rep. Alcee Hastings also signed Wexler's letter.

TV News (CNN Turk)

Domestic

- On Tuesday, the funeral of the far right BBP leader Muhsin Yazicioglu, who died in a helicopter crash last week, was be held in

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Ankara.

- DTP leader Ahmet Turk says the elections' outcome shows Kurdish people "took back their votes that they lent to the AKP."

- High Election Board (YSK) president Muammer Aydin says the municipality elections held on Sunday were "orderly, impartial and reliable."

- Ian Micallef of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities condemned in a statement the violence which killed six people and injured up to a hundred during the March 29 local elections in Turkey.

World

- Kemal Dervis, the former head of the UNDP, is named vice-president and director of the Global Economy and Development program at the Washington-based think-tank the Brookings Institution.

- Remzi Kartal, a former Turkish lawmaker from the banned pro-Kurdish Democracy Party (DEP) who was detained in Madrid on March 24, is released by a Spanish court on probation. Kartal is the head of the PKK-linked Kurdish Parliament in Exile.

- Arab leaders meeting in Doha, the Qatari capital, have rejected the ICC arrest warrant for the Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir.

- Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi storms out of the Arab League summit in Qatar after denouncing the Saudi king for his ties with the West.

JEFFREY